

Björn Hansen

CONSTRUCTIONAL ASPECTS OF THE RISE OF EPISTEMIC SENTENCE ADVERBS IN RUSSIAN

Summary

In this article we are going to trace the transition of modal verbs into epistemic adverbs. This development found in nearly all European languages will be analysed on the basis of Russian *možet (byt')* which goes back to the third person singular present tense of the modal verb *moč'* plus infinitive. In our study we shall focus on the constructional aspects of this language change with the aim to show the close interaction of semantics on the one, and argument structure on the other hand. The first part of the contribution is dedicated to a synchronic account and the second shows the diachronic development of the constructions involved. We will argue that the rise of epistemic sentence adverbs involves a third construction traditionally called complex subject sentence (*možet byt', čto p*). It will be shown that the rise of sentence adverbs is a complex process consisting of both gradual and discrete micro-processes.

1. Introduction

In many languages modals have split into two elements: the modal itself and an epistemic adverb. A known example is English *maybe* which is derived from the modal *may* plus the copula verb *to be*. Ramat & Ricca (1998) who analysed sentence adverbs in a wide range of European languages found that epistemic adverbs often emerge either through the fusion of a modal with a second element (= univertation) or the conversion of a modal:

- a) 'modal.3SG' + 'to be'; e.g. English *maybe* (← *may* + *be*) 'perhaps';
- b) 'modal.3SG' + 'to happen'; e.g. Dutch *misschien* 'perhaps';
- c) 'modal.3SG' + complementizer; e.g. Serbian/Croatian *možda* 'perhaps';
- d) conversion of a modal; e.g. Romanian *poate* 'perhaps' or 'can.3Sg'.

In our study we shall deal with the Russian modal *moč'* plus infinitive, its adverbial derivatives *možet byt'* (*byt' možet*) and *možet*, and those contexts which are traditionally called 'complex subject sentences'. We are dealing with instantiations of a network of related constructions:

1. modal construction: NP_{Nom} + Modal + VP_{Inf}

- (1) *Один такой вживленный протез может служить опорой для трех зубов.*
'One of those implanted dentures can function as support for three teeth.'
[“Дагестанская правда” 2005]¹

2a. adverbial construction: Modal3SG.PRS + to.be + Clause

- (2) *Может быть, в глубине души император даже пожалел заключённого*
[...] 'Perhaps in the deep of his heart the emperor even felt sorry for the prisoner [...]
[Юрий Тынянов 1933]

¹ Unless indicated otherwise all Modern Russian examples are from the Russian National Corpus (RNC).

2b. adverbial construction: Modal3SG.PRS + Clause

(3) *А может, профессия стала отторгать меня.* ‘Perhaps my profession has seized me.’ [Спивакова 2002]

3. ‘complex subject sentence’: Modal3SG.PRS + to.be + comp + Clause

(4) *Очень может быть, что это проблема не физическая, а психическая.* ‘It is quite possible that this is not a physical, but a psychological problem.’ [“Звезда”, 2003]

The main focus is on the internal make-up of these constructions and how they are historically related to each other. Our analysis is based on the assumption that the meaning of a construction is closely connected to its morpho-syntactic encoding. For the theoretical background we draw from the study Nuyts (2001) which offers a fine-grained description of the semantics and morpho-syntactic encoding of different constructions used to express epistemic meanings in the West Germanic languages English, Dutch and German. Apart from that, we shall put forward some hypotheses inspired by the version of construction grammar developed by Fried & Östman (2004) and Fried (2007).

2. Modal constructions

As mentioned above the lexeme *моџ*’ which obligatorily and exclusively governs an infinitival phrase forms a modal construction (henceforth Modcxn). We can assume modal constructions to form a cross-linguistic category identifiable by its specific semantics and its typical morpho-syntactic mode of expression:

A fully-fledged modal is a polyfunctional, syntactically autonomous expression of modality which shows a certain degree of grammaticalization. ‘Poly-functional’ is understood as covering a domain within the semantic space of modality. A fully-fledged modal functions as an operator on the predication level and/or the propositional level of the clause (Hansen & de Haan 2009, 512).

According to this treatment modals can be distinguished from lexical verbs with modal meanings like for example *умет*’ ‘to be able’: the former can express more than modal meaning (dynamic, deontic, epistemic), whereas the latter are restricted to a single modal meaning (ability, i.e. dynamic). A second feature of modals is their auxiliary-like syntactic behaviour in relation to the selection of the first argument; in contrast to verbs like *умет*’ they allow impersonal sentences or passive transformations without change in referential meaning.

(5) *Каждый студент может перевести этот текст.*

‘Any student can translate this text.’

Passive transformation:

(5a) *Этот текст может быть переведен каждым студентом.*

‘This text can be translated by any student.’

(5b) *Каждый студент умеет перевести этот текст.*

‘Any student is able to translate this text.’

Passive transformation:

(5c) * *Этот текст умеет быть переведен каждым студентом.*

The modal polyfunctionality and the specific syntactic behaviour indicate that the modal *moč* opens two syntactic slots, (NP_{Nom} and VP_{Inf}), but does not assign a semantic role to the NP. Modals share this feature with tense auxiliaries like the analytical future marker *bud-* (for more details on Modcxns in Slavonic see Besters-Dilger et al. in press).

Without giving a detailed account of the overall architecture of the cxns involved, we would like to point out some general features concerning their semantics and valence structure. By dealing with these features we have been inspired by Fried's and Östman's (2004) analysis of so-called raisings verbs like 'to seem'. The syntactic behaviour of the string *moč* plus infinitive can be accounted for by the unification of the lexical element *moč* with a co-instantiation pattern which is responsible for the fact that a single syntactic unit instantiates two valence elements; i.e. the modal has a surface subject which is not its semantic argument but which is delivered by the second verbal argument – the infinitival verb. In this sense *moč* is a predicate with two elements in their valence and the second element is instantiated by an infinitival verb phrase which has one own semantic and syntactic valence element which is instantiated as the surface subject of the construction. The notation #1 indicates that the argument is not a semantic element of the modal, but is contributed by the verb in the infinitival phrase. A Modcxn contains two chunks of information: the modal statement and the state of affairs. In relation to the grounding of the information, the cxn is unmarked (cf. Nuyts 2001 for West Germanic).

Figure 1

<u>моць + inherit Nom-subject</u>	
Semantics	
1.	X CAN do #2 p, because q
2.	The speaker CAN assume, that the state of affairs #2p holds true.
Pragmatics	
	Modality and state of affairs unmarked as to foregrounded information
Valence	
#1X - NP _θ =null, # 2p - VP _{inf}	
	Valence ' #1

3. Epistemic adverb constructions

Epistemic sentence adverbs (EpSA) form a class of invariable and syntactically dispensable lexemes which express the estimation of the likelihood that a certain state of affairs is true in the context of the possible world under consideration (compare Nuyts 2001, 21 ff and Ramat & Ricca 1998). The main functional difference between epistemic SA and modal constructions is the restriction of the former to purely epistemic meanings; i.e. EpSA are not polyfunctional like Modcxns. Syntactically, the two differ in their valence structure; whereas modal constructions open two syntactic valence slots (and one semantic slot), epistemic SA like all adverbs have only one syntactic slot, in this case the clause. Semantically they scope over the propositional content of the clause. It has to be pointed out, however, that many SA allow for narrower scoping and can scope over single phrases. This ambiguity in scope is reflected in word order: whereas the SA with a propositional scope is most often fronted, SA scoping over single phrases can be inserted in the middle of the clause. From a pragmatic point of view, the modal statement in

relation the state of affairs is treated as backgrounded information. These constructional properties can be captured in the simplified box notation in figure 2:

Figure 2

может быть+ Adverbial cxn	
Semantics	The speaker CAN assume, that the state of affairs #1p holds true or that the component #2 exists.
Pragmatics	Modality backgrounded, state of affairs foregrounded
Valence	#1 p clause #2 phrase

Možet byt' is a more or less frozen form which does not carry any inflectional features anymore: neither the past tense *moglo byt'* nor the conditional *moglo by byt'* are attested in the RNC. It is possible, however, to alter the order of the two elements (*byt' možet*).

(6) *Помолчал, вспоминая, **быть может**, где был раньше Забелин.* 'He was silent, perhaps remembering where Zabelin used to be.' [Семен Данилюк. Рублевая зона 2004]

From a structural and semantic point of view, it is worth mentioning that EpSA can not be negated;² cf.:

(2a) ****Не может быть**, в глубине души император даже пожалел заключённого Конаки [...]*

(3a) ****А, не может**, профессия стала отторгать меня.* [Спивакова 2002]

EpSA only in a limited way allow the nuancing of the epistemic evaluation through additional modifiers. According to the data retrieved from the Russian National Corpus the SA *možet byt'* can be modified by the grade adverbs *očen'* 'very' and *vpolne* 'completely':

(7) *Кстати, если бы не тюрьма, **вполне может быть**, мы и не получили бы изумительного поэта.* 'By the way, if hadn't been for prison it is quite possible that we wouldn't have got this great poet.' [Владимир Бондаренко // "Наш современник", 2004]

It is interesting to note that the eroded form *možet* can not be modified at all (no examples attested in the RNC).

(3b) ****А очень может**, профессия стала отторгать меня.* [Спивакова 2002]

Možet byt' and *možet* are not the only epistemic sentence adverbs derived from a modal construction. In Standard Russian we also have *dolžno byt'* and in non-standard *prostorečie dolžno* and *nado byt'*:

² Compare the description of the West Germanic equivalents in: Nuyts 2001.

(8) *Но проигрыватель, должно быть, работал не на той скорости.* ‘But the record player surely worked with the wrong speed.’ [Былые времена // “Вокруг света”, 2004]

(9) *Она, должно, за шпиона меня признала.* ‘Probably, she considered me a spy.’ [Владимир Черкасов. Черный ящик 2000]

(10) *Сидим, курим, никого не трогаем, да и местных не видать, надо быть, все окончательно в нирвану впали.* ‘I am sitting around, smoking and we don’t touch anybody, we can’t see the locals, probably, all of them got lost in Nirvana.’ [Сергей Эйгенсон 2003]

4. The ‘complex subject sentence’ *možet byt’*, čto p

Having analysed Modcxns and SA, we have to address the question how they are related to the construction Modal3sg.prs + to.be + comp + Clause. It appears that we are dealing with a third syntactic construction which involves the part of speech traditionally labelled ‘predicative’ (i.e. forms coinciding with adverbs and/or short forms of the adjective). Its complex morphological structure notwithstanding *možet byt’* behaves like a single syntactic word. We are dealing with one and the same construction type in following examples:

(11) *Может быть, что он пришел.* ‘It may be that he has arrived.’

Возможно, что он пришел. ‘It is possible that he has arrived.’

Очевидно, что он пришел. ‘It is obvious that he has arrived.’

Хорошо, что он пришел. ‘It’s good that he has arrived.’

etc.

This construction can be characterized as a specific type of complex sentence consisting of a matrix clause formed by a predicative and a complementizer-headed subordinated clause. Traditionally, it has not been treated as a cxn in its own right, but as a subtype of ‘complex sentences with a subordinate subject clause’ (‘složnopodčinennye predloženiya s pridatočnymi podležaščnymi’ in Galkina-Fedoruk et al. 1958, §119) or as a subtype of ‘explanatory sentences’ (‘iz’jasnitel’nye predloženiya’ RG 1982, §2801). As to the semantics, this construction carries a specific focal evaluative component: it expresses a speaker-based evaluation of the state of affairs encoded in the subordinate clause. The evaluation is treated as foregrounded, and the state of affairs as backgrounded information (cf. Nuyts 2001 for West Germanic). Therefore, we propose to label it *Focal Evaluative Construction* (FЕcxn). It expresses an (inter)subjective evaluation as an additional qualificational dimension in the sense of Nuyts who, however, restricts himself to epistemic modal evaluations. In contrast we extend the notion of intersubjectivity beyond modality to different types of evaluation in general. We, thus, include, axiological predicators containing an evaluation in relation to the dichotomy ‘good’ vs ‘bad’ like *xorošo* ‘good’, *prijatno* ‘nice’ and evidential markers which point at the source the speaker received his information from like *očevidno* ‘obvious’, *izvestno* ‘known’ etc. Rewording Nuyts’ definition we could say that:

By using a FE_{cxn} the speaker expresses a focussed evaluation of a state of affairs and indicates that this evaluation is not based on his/her individual conclusion, but is shared by a large group of people.

This factor of intersubjectivity is relevant if we compare the semantics of FE_{cxn} with the adverbial construction. Whereas the first clearly implies that the speaker shares his assumption with a larger group of people, the latter does not contain any suggestion as to whether the epistemic evaluation is subjective or intersubjective (cf. Nuyts 2001 for West Germanic). In comparison to the SA, *možet byt'* if embedded in a FE_{cxn} more frequently carries additional modifiers specifying the epistemic scale of likelihood. Thus, nearly all instances of the string *ocěn' možet byt'* in the RNC belong to this type.

(12) *Очень может быть, что Тойота покажет хороший результат, [...]* 'It is quite possible that Toyota will show good results.' [Автогонки-3 (форум) 2005]

(13) *Вполне вероятно, что президент затеял эти реформы, [...]* 'It is quite likely that the president has made up these reforms.' ["Еженедельный журнал", 2003.03.17]

A major difference to EpSA, is the fact that the evaluation encoded in the FE_{cxn} can be freely negated. The verb in the subordinate clause can take indicative or conditional mood:

(14) *Не может быть, чтобы его это совсем не угнетало.* 'It is not possible that this wouldn't oppress him.' [Анна Берсенева. Полет над разлукой 2003-2005]

(15) *Не важно, что кузов выполнен не из брони, а из полиэтилена высокой прочности.* 'It is not important that the trunk is not made of metal, but of high density polyethylene.' [Николай Качурин // "Автопилот", 2002.03.15]

The matrix clause frequently consists of a single lexeme, but some predicatives allow not only for intensifiers, but also for dative subjects:

(16) *Мне даже радостно, что от моего прощения ему станет немного легче.* 'I am even happy that he will feel somewhat better because of my excuse.' [Запись LiveJournal 2004]

In these cases, the semantic component 'general evaluation' is overridden through the downsizing of the reference to the evaluating person encoded in the dative subject. It is worth pointing out, however, that *možet byt'* differs from axiological and evidential predicatives in that it does not allow dative subjects and that it does not inflect for tense. This shows that *možet byt'* lacks features of a fully-fledged main clause.

(17) *Мне известно было, что они сами в кают-компании издевались над священником.* 'It was known to me that in the cabin group they made fun of the priest.' [А. С. Новиков-Прибой. Цусима 1932-1935]

(12a) **Мне может быть, что Тойота покажет хороший результат, [...]*

(12b) **Могло быть, что Тойота покажет хороший результат, [...]*

Similarly to the corresponding SA, *možet byt'* allows for the reverse word order which, however, is quite rare. There are only 17 examples of the string *byt' možet čto* in the RNC, most of which date back to the 19th century.

(18) **Быть может, что** плод того и другого будет одинакий, но на сию минуту не об этом речь. ‘It may be the case that some of the fruit will be the same, but that is not the topic now.’ [А. И. Герцен. Былое и думы. Часть первая. Детская и университет 1853-1860]

Although there is a strong tendency towards coalescence of the two elements it is still possible to insert lexical material between them:

(19) **Может такое быть**, что окорочка мешают ползать? ‘Can it be the case that the thighs hamper crawling?’ [Наши дети: Малыши до года (форум) 2004]

Concluding this section, we can propose a semi-formal notation of the instantiation of *možet byt’* in a Focal Evaluation Construction.

Figure 3

<u>может быть + FExn</u>	
Semantics	The speaker and other people CAN assume, that the state of affairs #1p holds true.
Pragmatics	Evaluation foregrounded, state of affairs backgrounded
Valence	#1 p subordinate clause

5. The rise of EpSA

In the first step of the diachronic analysis, we checked the existing research literature including the historical dictionaries.³ Second, we made use of the Regensburg Diachronic Corpus of Russian (RRudi) which contains texts ranging from the 11th until the 17th century.⁴ The Middle Russian Period was additionally complemented by an edition of the ‘Vesti-Kuranty’ (1651-1652, 1654-1656 and 1658-1660). Apart from that, we used the on-line library of Moškov and – for the 19th century – the RNC. Although the diachronic data in some aspect remain unclear, especially in relation to chronology, we claim that the transition from the modal *moč’* to the epistemic SA *možet* goes through six stages.

Stage I Control verb cxn [NP_{Nom}] + [mož-] + [VP_{infinitive}]

According to the available data and etymological reconstruction, we can assume that Proto East Slavonic *moči* originally had the meaning ‘to be strong’ (compare the cognates *mošč’* ‘power’ and *mogučij* ‘powerful’) and that in the first cases where it took an infinitival complement it was restricted to activity verbs and had the meaning ‘to be able to do

³ These are: *Slovar’ drevnerusskogo jazyka XI-XIV vv.* and *Slovar’ russkogo jazyka XI-XVII vv.*; Vaulina 1988, Borkovskij 1979.

⁴ In its current state RRudi contains the following texts (including texts accessible for internal usage): *Flavius Iosephus: Iudejskaja vojna*, 11th century, *Šestodnev Ioanna Ėkzarcha Bolgarskogo* 11th century, *Nestor’s chronicle (Lavr.)* 11th (14th) century, *Slova i pritči Kirilla Turovskogo* 12th century, Afanasij Nikitin: *Choždenie za tri morja* 15th century, *Povest’ o Frole Skobeeve* 17th century, *Žitie protopopa Avvakuma* 17th century.

something’ as illustrated by the following sentence from a birch bark document dating from the 13th century:⁵

(20) *нѣ хощеши ли да ѿ мене не могу вода(ти)* ‘If you don’t want, I can’t give more anyway.’ [Грамота Тверь 1, 13th century]

During the first reconstructed stage of Early East Slavonic, we are dealing with an infinitival control construction which presumably influenced by Church Slavonic language use later developed into an auxiliary-like raising construction.

Stage II ‘raising’ *cxn* [NP_{Nom}] + [mož-] + [byti] + [NP/AdjP/PtcpP/PP]

The second stage is already attested in Old Church Slavonic and in early Russian Church Slavonic texts like the *Iudejskja vojna* (11th century). Here, we find a host-class expansion of the verb *moči* which becomes compatible with stative verbs and, in particular, with the copular verb *byti* ‘to be’.

(21) *кнѣжение и миръ не можетъ безъ грѣха быти* ‘and the world cannot be without sin.’ [Лаврентьевская летопись 12th-14th centuries]

(22) *аще кто положитъ душу свою за другъ свои можетъ мои оученикъ быти.* ‘If someone gives his soul for his neighbour, he can be my disciple.’ [Лаврентьевская летопись 12th-14th centuries]

The modal construction allows for readings beyond ability like objective possibility (ex. 21) and permission (22). Here, the subject position can be filled by non-animated nouns as in ex. (21) *кнѣжение* which is typical of ‘raising’ *cxns*. The copula can syntactically be described as a two-place predicator governing a predicate phrase (noun, adjectival, participial or prepositional phrase). Semantically, it brings along its own semantic roles: the subject is assigned the semantic role theme and the predicative element the role property.

Stage III Modal Existential context [PronounNom] + [možet] + [byti]

A critical context for a further step in the direction of adverbialization is characterized by the reduction of the argument structure on the one hand and the expansion of the potential referents of the subject NP to propositional entities on the other. The first takes place if the second valence slot of *byti* stays empty which renders the reading of an existential verb as in:

(23) *глаголетъ пакы ѿ нихъ инъ . не можетъ никтоже быти и рожати сѣ.* ‘another one said: nobody can exist and at the same time being born.’ [Шестоднев 11th/14th century]

The second feature is present if the subject position is filled with a pronoun referring not to a substantial entity but to a state of affairs. The modal is restricted to the 3 Person Singular Neuter:

(24) *то тоже боудеть чловѣкъ еже и богъ еже не можетъ быти николиже.* ‘so man would be like God what will never be.’ [Шестоднев 11th/14th century]

⁵ For details on the use of *moči* in birch bark documents see: Hansen 2004.

Semantically this construction renders an intersubjective epistemic reading as typical of the FEcxn (see section 3). The other modal meanings are not possible in this constructional context.

Stage IV FEcxn [možet] + [byt'] + [complementizer + clause]

According to our data, *moč'* entered the FEcxn not earlier than in Middle Russian times which perfectly squares with Borkovskij's claims (1979: 414ff) that predicatives expressing modal meanings first appear with subordinate clauses in the Middle Russian period. We found no examples in RRudi of *možet* plus *byt'* governing a fully furnished complement clause. There are, however, examples from the 'Vesti-Kuranty' from the middle of the 17th century. Note that there is no Pronoun in the subject position:

(25) *Из Варшавы вѣсти приходятъ что соима которая июля къ КГ му числѣ посрочена вперед отложена бѣдетъ и можетъ бытъ что земское собрание в ѣномъ мѣсте бѣдетъ [...]*

'From Warsaw there are news saying that the Sejm which was scheduled for July 23rd will be postponed and that it may be that the parliament session will take place somewhere else [...]' [Vesti-Kuranty 16, 18. April 1652]

Due to the lack of space we can not give a complete account of the development of the FEcxn as such which has to be left for future research. It must suffice to point out that the FEcxn originated in formal Church Slavonic texts from where it spread into the East Slavonic vernacular. In Old Russian, it was restricted to axiological (e.g. *pravedno* 'right') and evidential predicatives (e.g. *javě* 'evident'); in the Middle Russian period the FEcxn became compatible with modal predicatives (ibidem).

Stage V EpSA [možet] + [byt'] + [clause]

The next step in the development is the omission of the complementizer *čto(by)* which renders an ambiguous morpho-syntactic structure: it can either be interpreted as a asyndetic complex sentence (i.e. an FEcxn) or as a simple clause containing a parenthetical. According to the Dictionary of the 11th to the 16th centuries the cxn is first attested already at the beginning of 16th century:

(26) *И сии бо можетъ быти заблудятъ ба ищущи и хотящи обрѣсти.* 'Searching and longing for God, maybe, they get lost.' [Геннадиевская библия 1499]

As there is not a single example in the whole RRudi we can assume that it must have been exceptionally rare in the 16th century and became frequent much later (no examples in the Vesti-Kuranty 1651-1652, 1654-1656 and 1658-1660). We found plenty of examples in the 18th century and at the beginning of the 19th.

(27) *Можетъ быть, он хотелъ сделать то же, что сделалъ после Магометъ II.* 'Maybe, he wanted to do the same as Muhammed II did afterwards.' [Карамзин 1819]

Stage VI EpSA [možet] + [clause]

The final stage which is still not accepted in formal speech is reached when the original copula is elided and we get a mono-morphemic element.

(28) *Минуточкой бы пришли раньше, то, **может**, застали бы дома.* ‘Had you arrived one minute earlier, then you might have met him at home.’ [Гоголь 1863]

These contexts are non-ambiguously analysed as an adverbial cxn.

6. Gradual and non-gradual processes involved

In the final part of our contribution, we shall try to characterize the micro-changes described in the previous section in terms of gradualness vs. discreteness. In our analysis, we shall draw from the terminology proposed by Aarts (2007) who distinguishes two basic types of synchronic gradience: first, subjective gradience involves a single class of linguistic elements and allows for a particular element X from that category to be closer to the prototype of the category than some other element Y. Second, intersective gradience involves two categories and obtains where there exists a set of elements characterised by a subset of A-like properties and a subset of B-like properties. Gradualness is to be understood as the diachronic equivalent of synchronic gradience. The question we would like to address is ‘does the transition of the modal *moč*’ into an epistemic sentence adverb involve categorical gradualness?’

From Stage I ‘control cxn’ to Stage II ‘raising cxn’ we are dealing with the gradual bleaching of the modal which becomes compatible with a wider range of verbs. The modal expands its meaning from participant-internal and participant-external possibility to epistemic possibility. This type of host-class expansion is a gradual change and leads to a gradual transition of control cxn into a ‘raising-like’ modal cxn. As we cannot identify clear cut-off points we have to assume structures intersecting between the two categories. The transition from stage II to stage III (labelled ‘modal existential context’) involves two micro-changes on the morpho-syntactic level. On the one hand, we are dealing with a host-class expansion, in this case from NPs denoting substantial entities to pronouns referring to state of affairs. On the other hand, the change in the argument structure involves the loss of one valence slot which is a discrete non-gradual micro-change. At this stage *možet* and *byti* are still to be analyzed as two lexical entries. On the semantic level we witness the loss in polyfunctionality: whereas stage II contexts still allow for dynamic or deontic readings the ‘modal existential context’ is restricted to inter-subjective epistemic possibility. Although the data are not absolutely clear, we assume that the EpSA arose via the FEcxn (stage IV) which would imply a transition from an infinitival cxn into a cxn carrying features of a complex sentence: the string *možet byt*’ governs a complement clause introduced by the subordinator *čto(by)*. Apart from that, the argument frames of the elements *možet* and *byt*’ seem to merge, resulting in a single semantic and syntactic valence frame. Both micro-processes are non-gradual. It is interesting to note that there is no evidence that these morpho-syntactic processes trigger semantic changes. There is, however, a shift in the information structure leading to the foregrounding of the epistemic evaluation. Bearing in mind that we need more empirical evidence we would claim that the step from stage IV to stage V results in the emergence of a true SA. The elision of the complementizer leads to an ambiguous structure oscillating between an asyndetic complex clause and a single clause with a SA which might be interpreted as a case of intersective gradience und, thus, as a gradual change. On the pragmatic level, the distribution of foregrounded and backgrounded information is reversed. The dropping of the complementizer is accompanied by a slight semantic shift leading to a neutralization in terms of inter-

subjectivity of the epistemic evaluation. When developing from stage V to stage VI the EpSA goes through a process of phonological erosion and the adverb is further backgrounded which is reflected in the complete loss of the capability to take modifiers like negation and intensifiers.

We have tried to show that the semantics of the lexical entry *moč'* to a high degree depends on the cxn it is instantiated in. To conclude, we put forward the hypothesis that we are dealing with a cross-linguistic path of change also attested in other languages. It is for example known to exist in English (cf. Visser 1973, 170). Another question to be addressed in future research concerns the question whether this path shares features with the known rise of quotative constructions which according to Harris & Campbell (1995, 170ff) (discussed in Wiemer 2008) likewise involves the transition from a mono-clausal into a bi-clausal structure and the loss of argument slots of the verb of saying.

Abbreviations

Cxn - construction
 EpSA – epistemic sentence adverb
 FEcxn – focal evaluative construction
 Modcxn – modal construction
 RNC – Russian National Corpus
 SA – sentence adverb

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Prof. Dr. Björn Hansen, Universität Regensburg, Universitätsstraße 31, 93053 Regensburg, Deutschland (Bjoern.Hansen@sprachlit.uni-regensburg.de)